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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 002823

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PINS ECON EFIN TU
SUBJECT: TURKISH POLITICAL STABILITY: TENSIONS BREAK THE SURFACE

REF: A. ANKARA 2663
B. ANKARA 2600
C. ANKARA 2204
D. ANKARA 0348
E. ANKARA 1842

(U) Classified by Ambassador Eric Edelman; reasons: 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Turkey has entered a period of increased political tension as a result of the education reform controversy. PM Erdogan will remain under constant pressure from within his AK Party and from the Turkish military. Erdogan and AKP are showing strains as even relatively "liberal" members of the "secular" Establishment again question AKP's agenda. Erdogan's ability to use political capital has decreased and U.S. objectives with Turkey face the prospect again of being manipulated in the domestic arena. We will need to avoid being seen either as pursuing a "moderate Islamic" vice truly secular Turkey or as giving even a yellow light to the military in its domestic maneuvering. Turkey's EU candidacy remains the major constraining force in this struggle. End summary.

NO AGREEMENT EVEN ON REASONABLE SOLUTIONS

¶2. (U) Throwing down the gauntlet to the "secular" Turkish Establishment, PM Erdogan has insisted on passing education-reform legislation seen by the Establishment as a sign of an Islamicizing agenda threatening what the establishment defines as the core values of "secular" Turkey (refs A,B). His approach has brought to the surface the traditional Establishment's deep underlying distrust of, and visceral distaste for, Erdogan and his Anatolia-oriented, Islam-influenced AKP. We expect President Sezer to veto the law; if Erdogan insists on passing it again (further sharpening the State's animosity) we expect Sezer to work with main opposition CHP to take the issue to the Constitutional Court.

¶3. (C) As refs (A,B) point out, the reform law in question tries to address problems of making higher education more accessible and relevant and eliminating discrimination against high school grads (principally graduates of preacher schools) who want to study fields in university different from their high school concentrations. The route pressed by AKP could serve to make religious high schools more attractive but would likely lead to no improvement of either the current uneven quality of religious education or quality and availability of higher education.

ERDOGAN AND AK PARTY OFF BALANCE

¶4. (C) The AKP leadership refuses to make its intentions and goals clear, either to the electorate, to its own parliamentary group, or in a coordinated way through consistent dialogue with other loci of State power, however difficult such a dialogue has proven to be so far. The broadest range of our AKP contacts readily, if passively, admits that this failure of public relations is a problem. The reasons AKP is pushing this reform now after withdrawing it in Oct. 2003 are not clear. Some speculate it is motivated in part by a desire to respond to pent-up expectations of Islamist elements of its base after seeing an increase in Islamist Saadet Party's vote in the March 2004 local elections.

¶5. (C) Erdogan has cut himself off both from his party and from a broad flow of timely, accurate information about political developments, the intentions of the TGS and other core elements of the State, and economic/financial developments; a recent column by "Aksam"'s Ankara bureau

chief -- "Erdogan's Strategic Isolation" -- has been widely read and accepted as on target by key party insiders. Erdogan has compounded his problems by publicly humiliating the AKP parliamentary group: MPs are insulted by his arrogance that they are "just filler". He has alienated even those Cabinet members who are close to him. In this latter regard, two contacts have told us that at the May 10 Cabinet meeting Erdogan belittlingly told Transportation Minister Yildirim to stop accepting rides in corporate jets and derisively ordered Finance Minister Unakitan to fix the financial situation by saying, "It's not like your little corn deal" (an allusion to the inside information Unakitan's son used to make a windfall profit by importing corn just before a rise in an import tax).

¶ 16. (C) Erdogan sometimes evinces an aura of someone who believes he has a mission from God to rule Turkey (ref D). He still has a thirst for absolute power (ref E). He and his party have failed to deal intelligently with the reality that the armed forces retain significant influence and are a political power to be reckoned with (ref C).

THE TURKISH MILITARY EXPLOITS AKP'S WEAKNESS

¶ 17. (C) CHOD Ozkok's mid-April warnings about military red lines (ref C) were followed by a blunter General Staff (TGS) warning in response to Erdogan's insistence on challenging the status quo through his draft education reform bill. The TGS seems constrained by Turkish public opinion's support for the potential of EU membership and aversion to coups. Thus, in seeking to manipulate the political scene, TGS is looking beyond either a coup or something equivalent to the post-modern coup ("February 28 process") the military used to engineer the removal from office of Islamist PM Erbakan in ¶ 1997. In what commentators are beginning to call a post-post-modern approach (ref C), retired and some active senior officers appear to be working both to create alternative power centers, to accentuate existing fissures in AKP, and to provoke Erdogan's further isolation within the party.

¶ 18. (C) Justice Minister Cemil Cicek confided to "Aksam" Ankara bureau chief Nuray Basaran that the military is aware of and complicit in his and his faction of 30 MPs' attempts to egg Erdogan on to more confrontation. AKP chief whip Salih Kapusuz, one of FonMin Gul's closest allies, acknowledged to us what we have heard from other contacts: that he and, he strongly implied, Gul are in direct contact with retired four-star NSC SecGen Tuncer Kilinc. Gul, who has a carefully-controlled but competitive relationship with Erdogan and who was preferred by the TGS over Erdogan until the TGS concluded that, underneath his reasonable facade, Gul is a much more committed Islamist, has tried to manipulate Erdogan in a more accommodative way than Cicek. However, Gul's and a group of 25 like-minded MPs' reported attempt on May 10 to remind Erdogan of the costs of Erbakan's 1997 dismissive attitude toward the military fell on deaf ears.

WHERE DOES THE LIBERAL ESTABLISHMENT STAND?

¶ 19. (C) We are seeing more and more that pillars of the relatively enlightened segment of the secularist Establishment are realizing both how serious the gap is between the military and AKP, how AKP can't or won't improve its timing or focus constructively on big issues, or how AKP has lost its momentum.

¶ 10. (S) MFA spokesman Namik Tan, a rigid secularist but no supporter of the hard-core Kemalist line that the military should intervene, acknowledged to us May 13 that the AKP-military tensions are very serious. A group of prominent moderate secularists who have had hopes that AKP would be the engine of long-needed reform and who have long advocated open society (TEB Bank chairman Hasan Colakoglu, academic and columnist Soli Ozel, former ambassador and leading NGO figure Ozden Sanberk, former Treasury undersecretary Faik Oztrak, Central Bank deputy chairman Sukru Binay) concluded at their periodic confidential meeting May 12 that Turkey's future -- especially on key foreign policy questions such as NATO's future and Iraq -- no longer depends on AKP but on how close the Turkish military's relationship with the U.S. will be. Ertugrul Ozkok, editor of mass circulation "Hurriyet", which belongs to a media group dependent on the Erdogan government's good will to avoid corruption investigations, used his May 9 column to satirize Erdogan's wife Emine by

figuratively stripping her bare for wearing stiletto heels under her Islamist dress during the Erdogan's recent official visit to Athens.

READING THE TEA LEAVES TO SEE WHERE THE U.S. STANDS

¶11. (C) It is clear to us from our contacts with AKP and the military that both sides are trying to understand where the U.S. stands and to pull the U.S. to their side. At the same time, one thing that all our contacts outside AKP agree on adamantly is that foreign observers should rigorously avoid any public comment, since any comment could be interpreted as taking sides. Namik Tan was particularly acerbic on this point in a comment to us May 13, dismissing EU ambassador Kretschmer's criticism of the military's intervention on the higher education reform law as inept, unbalanced, and counterproductive.

COMMENT

¶12. (C) This tension between the military/traditional elite and AKP is not merely spring fever. It will not go away. On one side Erdogan and his party are convinced nothing can stop them. This conviction seems to have some validity as long as Erdogan and AKP maintain a constitutional majority in Parliament and strong public support. On the other side Erdogan's failure to organize his government and party into a coherent whole with advisors clued in to the news cycle and a process for analyzing domestic and foreign developments and projecting a consistent vision leaves him vulnerable. AKP's ineptitude in public relations, and the Islamist past of many AKP officials feed TGS's suspicions of AKP's intentions, intensifying the military's search for alternative political forces.

¶13. (C) The resulting struggle is not equal. First, AKP is weighed down by lack of clarity about its intentions, and the Erdogan government's inability to take sensible, rapid decisions, including on issues of direct and material interest to the U.S. Second, the weight of fear and intimidation as tools of State power has not diminished as much as Erdogan, Gul and the brotherhoods and lodges in AKP assert. And third, TGS has powerful allies in the judiciary, bureaucracy, and business community and has the ability to play on the personal ambitions and rivalries of politicians within and outside AKP. The military does not accept that there is a contradiction between stating that it sees Turkey's membership in the EU as important and reiterating that it has a duty to defend the "secular" nature of the Republic. This is a duty the military is once again forcefully declaring it will not be deterred from defending. The problem is that the military has no viable political alternative to turn to and has a history of poor judgment in choosing political champions.

¶14. (C) Bottom line: Turkey is entering a period of uncertainty which it has to resolve itself, and where attempts to influence the direction from outside will have unpredictable and unquestionably negative effects. The one governor over the next six months will be Turkey's search for a start date for EU accession talks.
EDELMAN